Reflections of a “H.O.” Radar Mechanic.

Working as a laboratory assistant at the Walter & Eliza Hall Institute, I saw the newly built Royal Melbourne Hospital given over to the U.S. Army in early 1942, and rapidly filled with casualties from Guadalcanal and New Guinea.

When I turned 18, in January 1943, the Navy was advertising for laboratory assistants, so I joined up as a Sick Bay Tiffy, only to find that the training offered was boring repetition of the sick berth manual, and laboratory work was non existent.

Fortunately I spotted a notice calling for those with leaving physics to apply for training as a Radio Mechanic, applied, and was accepted, joining class R.A.N. 19 at the Melbourne Technical College, now the RMIT University.

We were on strength at HMAS Lonsdale, the Port Melbourne shore base, but locals were allowed to live out, going ashore at 10 p.m. after supervised study.

The six-month course in radio was given by a civilian instructor, Mr Asbornsen, (nick named “Aspro”) in Campbell’s Building in Victoria St.

Herewith a photo of RAN class 19, with “Aspro,” published in the Melbourne Age about 13th July 1943.

Completing the radio course, we were promoted to Radio Mechanic IV, acting Leading R.M.

Those selected for Radar were transferred from the RANR to the RAN on a short term of two years or the duration, hence “Hostilities Only or H.O.”

To mark our permanent Navy status we were issued with a new service number, a two inch cube of yellow soap, a pair of leather slippers, and a “housewife” sewing kit, which I

still have, although it is a bit moth eaten.

We were transferred to the Sydney shore station, HMAS Rushcutter, for Radar training at Watson's Bay, South Head. (HMAS Watson did not then exist.)

Completing Radar training, I was confirmed LRM, issued with a wooden tool box and tools, which I still retain.

I was then drafted to HMAS Penguin, to "stand by" Junee, completing her fitting out at Poole & Steele's yard in Balmain, the third man to join her, after the Chief stoker and the Chief ERA.

Why the Radar Mechanic was sent so early is a bit of a mystery, but I had a good chance to get a few tiddly jobs done, and made the battery locker in the Port waist comfortable as my private space.

This space began as a broom and cleaning locker before Radar was fitted.

We had two sets, the A286Q air warning set with the bedstead array aerial at the head of the foremast, and the A272, aerial in the "dustbin" above the signal projector on top of the bridge.

Both sets were in what was originally the captain's bathroom, starboard side aft in the bridge structure, with the 272 transmitter under the ladder leading up to the bridge.

Each had a simple type A display on a five inch CRT. No PPI.

The museum ship, HMAS Castlemaine has good presentation of slightly more advanced equipment, but placed facing the door, instead of aft.

When Junee commissioned and we sailed north, I quickly learnt that the officers knew little of Radar, hence were disinclined to trust it.

I also learnt the value of the written operator's log book, so that, when called to the bridge to explain why radar had not reported the great Sunderland flying boat in clear view I was able to show that it had been reported half an hour earlier, with the operator told to "disregard."

If the Officer of the Watch could not see anything where the echo was reported it was deemed not to exist.

The Captain only trusted us after radar was able to show him a safe way out of a deserted, unlit, bay west of Darwin on a pitch-black night.

Jap aircraft had become quite rare over Darwin in 1944, and the Spitfire pilots a trifle bored, however the 286 aerial required servicing, with the mechanic sitting on the top of the foremast, highly visible to bored pilots.

One would hear the growing roar of a Merlin engine, look around to see a Spitfire hurtling inbound at 400 knots, and cling to the aerial for dear life as it flashed past, so close the slip stream shook the mast, and the mug mechanic sitting on it.

Years later I learned from a fellow medical student that he had been one of those bored pilots buzzing sailors sitting on masts in Darwin harbour.

"You would lose sight of them about 400 yards out, count three and then pull back on the stick."

By the next year, reliance on Radar had developed, demonstrated when HMAS Manoora almost ran us down north of New Guinea, our 272 having drifted out of tune.

Nobody on the bridge saw a thing until the challenge was blinked out of the blackness of night.

Radar's greatest glory on Junee occurred when we were escorting a floating dock, YFD21, under tow by U.S. tug "Point Loma" from Hollandia, north towards the Philippines.

In the dead of night, with the tow making five knots, and Junee circling around, our 272 reported an echo on the far side of the dock.

Action stations, full ahead, we charged round to the echo position. Nothing, no sighting, no Asdic echo, chaos, confusion, and concern.

All round sweep on short-range scale, and there was the echo, again on the far side of the dock.

We raced around like the blue tailed fly, and again nothing, only to have the echo again reappear on the far side of the dock.

Finally, after we had lit up the world with star shell, the penny dropped.

We were getting a double bounce echo, the beam travelling from Junee to dock, to Junee with enough energy bouncing back from Junee to dock and back again for a second journey, giving a second, tiny, echo at double the range.

The captain took some convincing to prove this, by taking the ship slowly towards and then away from the dock, demonstrating that the second echo range was always double the range of the dock.

This was a ghost echo with a rare but logical explanation, but the radar boys on Junee had humble pie for supper for

many a day.

One other little snippet may be of interest to surviving HO RM's

How did it come about that PO RM's were messed with the seaman PO's rather than with the ERA's ?

Well, on HMAS Junee we had a PO Mechanician, a permanent Navy chap who had entered as a stoker, and worked his way up to be a trade qualified fitter, and rightly proud of his trade status, messed with the ERA's, as was this upstart young pup of a Radar Mechanic, who was not really a trade qualified artisan.

This guy complained to the Captain, and then to NOIC Darwin, from whom it went on up through channels to Navy office in Melbourne, where a decision was made and promulgated as a policy, that henceforth Radar Mechanics were to mess with the seaman PO's.

Much ado about trade status.

1251 words

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Names of those in Age photo : from left to right

Scaife, Clyde A.G. 26819
King, Roy L. 26815
Asbornsen “Aspro”
Richardson Alex. C. 26815
Simons, D. J. 26332
Civvy, unknown ? From Melbourne Tech.
Rees, Thomas L. 26820
Mills, J.M. 26813
Dawson, S.H. 26817
Laws, M.G. 26818 later O665, Lieut. Commander.
Shorland, D.A. 26814